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“You are quite Red and still so White”: Presentation of Femininity in Bill Willingham’s Fables.

Abstract: Fairy tale characters have undergone psychological and ideological transfigurations over the years under the celebrations of writers, readers, critics, raconteurs and feminists. What they imply in their works has been made explicit by the 2-Dimensional, sequential and artistic renderings. *Fables*, one of the most popular DC Vertigo publications, could be variegated from other postmodern fairy tale retellings, especially due to its sequential graphic quality. The 150 issue long grand graphic narrative, details the epic adventures of Fairy tale characters in the contemporary world, where they are adorned with a plausibility that passes them as distinguished citizens of New York society. They delve into the complexities in the day-to-functioning of a refugee community, near immortal beings, whose survival depends on the memory of those who believe in them. This research paper deals with the representations of Snow White and Rose Red, twins and immortal fairy tale protagonists, whose fictional lives in the contemporary American society is revealed through the episodes of *Fables*. It is also a study on the symbolic nature of their traditional past and how their femininity is still challenged in the apparently globalised and democratic milieu.

Key words: Fairy tales, Graphics narrative, Cultural Memory, femininity.

1. Introduction

"What it is they have lost,

Why does it ache so much? "

- "Rose Red and Snow White" by Kim Antieau.

Postmodern endeavours in literary discourses use methods that widen the scope of imagination. As people demand explicit answers, the visual and the virtual gain more prominence over the symbolic and the metaphoric. Graphic narratives have flourished among popular culture, mainly for its iconic portrayal of life and characters. Experimentation and intertextuality projects themselves as the basic characteristics of graphic narratives.

Meanwhile, revisions and subversion of classical or folk literature have been in vogue since the late nineteenth century. Bacchilega points out that those postmodern permutations of fairy tales depend on varying ideologies, histories and material conditions: "The wonder of fairy tales then relies on the magic mirror which artfully reflects and frames desire. Overly reproducing the workings of desire, postmodern wonders perform multiple tricks with that mirror to re-envision its images of story and woman."(146). However, Adam Zolkover observes that, "Fables , present an inversion: Whereas fairy tale characters tend to be flattened, stylised, stripped of all but the most essential references to the sensual and the physic, the characters in Fables are emotionally complex, sexually explicit, and physically present."(42).

Written and created under the talented hands of Bill Willingham and Lan Medina, Fables is 150 issues long graphic narrative (later compiled in 22 volumes) and narrates the lives of popular fairy tale characters in a postmodern American milieu. These characters, Fables as they are known, live in Fabletown, a fictional town in New York. The glamorous lives of the near immortals as these are mulched with ideology politics of the human world and are

transmogrified from their fairy tale persona. Willingham has engaged himself to developing/creating a physical and psychological depth to the otherwise abstract characters, and in the process have given a corporeal guise to the fairy tale characters.

However, Fables are not just tales about fairy tale refugees, who embark on an epic journey to free themselves and their homeland from their Adversary. It is also an emotionally charged story of two sisters, bound by love, but cruelly separated by fate. They are Snow White and Rose Red, a direct permutation of Grimm's "Snow White and Rose Red".

2. The Female figures in Bill Willingham's Fables

Feminist critics like Simone de Beauvoir sees fairy tales as manifestations of a feminine "myth", which "still encourages the young girl to expect fortune and happiness from some Prince Charming rather than to attempt by herself through difficult and uncertain conquests"(1956: 156). Similarly, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar calls Snow White "An angel in the house of myths, a docile and submissive heroine, who has "no story of her own" (39). Like Beauvoir, they contemplates on Snow White's "future" after marrying the Prince: "Trained to domesticity by her dwarf instructors, will she sit in the window, gazing out on the wild forest of her past...?" (42). Postmodern writers have attempted to revise this myth by devising narrative and textual strategies to resist the sexual colonization of female characters. But Christina Bacchilega points out that, "Even those narratives which celebrate paradox in the name of Avant Garde still rely on some norms and reproduce some minimal consensus simply to be intelligible"(8).

The subverted figure of Snow White in Fables, if observed closely, neither has a story of her own. From her childhood, she is denied the freedom to express her wishes and live a structured livelihood with her twin sister, under the watchful eye of their mother. In Fabletown (their present abode in New York), she is introduced as a determined, fast talking deputy mayor,

efficient in her duties. Motherhood, and marriage to Bigby (interestingly, the humanized version of the Big Bad wolf, who threatens the Little Red Riding Hood and blows away the home of three little pigs), subsequently demands a retirement from the government service and commitment towards the family. Until the end of the series, Snow White is seen as a concerned mother and a loving wife.

Beauvoir sees that the curse of the Sleeping Beauty indicates that man still desires the subjection of women in order to exercise his masculine power. "What would Prince Charming have for occupation if he had not to awaken the Sleeping Beauty?" she asks (199). In Fables #2: Storybook Love, to silence a mundy from spilling the Fabletown secrets, the Fable men, Prince Charming, Bigby, Bluebeard, Flycatcher and Boy Blue seek the help of Sleeping Beauty to drug, the people around her, to sleep.

Women are expected to be submissive and indifferent to their conscience and desires. They are the mirrors through which men enjoy narcissistic satisfaction. Susan Gubar observes, "... Whether she is in the epitome of male desires or the symbol of male fears, the representatives of his needs or his revulsions, the woman of myths is not her own person"(301). Any disturbance from the past of "other" instinctively causes turbulence. Prince Charming in Fables, who is more a stereotype than a character in the fairy tales, is one such personality who doesn't give himself to the "other". In Volume Three: Storybook Love he sheepishly admits, "I always truly love a woman when I'm first chasing her. My love quickly faded once I had to settle down to the tough business of actually living with her."(Issue 17:3-4).

In the hands of Willingham, the famed fairy tale females have undergone a denaturalization that nevertheless goes in par with the contemporary world as well as with their current status as legends in exile. The basic traits of the characters remain preserved, but their gender roles and/or royalty are interpreted in order to obliterate the textual traditions of the

fairy tale. The Little Red Riding Hood in Fables is not an unattractive, ignorant girl of the folklore but is transformed into a fighter who sacrifices her life for the freedom of her fable comrades. In Fabletown she undergoes makeover and turns to a desirable, sophisticated city girl.

The predicaments of the fairy tale princesses are at the hands of Princes and there are expected to follow suit once they are kissed into possession. As Luce Irigaray comments, “Their Property is our Exile. Their enclosures, the death of our love. Their words, the gags upon our lips.” (1980:74). Fables seem to be a quashing of these exile as the princesses seem to be in an independent existence from their bonded past. However, a close reading reveals that Briar Rose or Sleeping Beauty is still under the mercy of the one who kisses her awake. “Conveniently” for her, her beauty, wealth and talents keep her in preference among prospective lovers. Willingham parodies the gifts of Briar Rose (that fairies bestowed upon her) to the commodifiable materiality of feminine sexuality. Snow White, as a deputy mayor is engaged in works that is not unfamiliar to her, after spending years attending to the needs of dwarves. Their legends in exile in Fable town are not different from their past, as they are still a patriarchal property.

Fables do question the gender stereotypes through the representation of Cinderella, Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty), Snow White and Rose Red. Cinderella is a glamorous undercover agent, who is independent from fairy godmothers. The spin off series featuring her, like Cinderella: Fables are Forever and From Fabletown with Love resonate a James Bond aura. The Cinderella in Fables has her own story to tell and her own abilities to charm her targets by spinning stories and playing innocent female stereotypes to her advantage. However, physically she is portrayed as a highly desirable woman with sexually exaggerated sizes and

often drawn as sporting skimpy clothes and her life is seen to end in a drastic duel with Frau Totenkinder, her former fairy godmother.

Though women characters are prominent throughout the series, Fables cannot be read as a postmodern feminist storytelling. Willingham has indeed experimented with the fairy tale genre with narrative strategies specified to graphic narratives, but he is still seen to be bound by the conventional codes. Snow white, an able deputy mayor of the town, though moved out of love with Prince Charming, finds a perfect man in Bigby. Marriage and motherhood reclines her to household commitments. Rose Red, a libertine and a tomboy, falls into depression after her lover, Boy Blue's death. Briar Rose and Rapunzel are preoccupied with their past gifts, which they can't get rid of. Cinderella brushes pass the bitterness of her past through silver shoe business.

3. Mirrored by a Mother: Fables' "Snow White and Rose Red"

Zolkover observes that if Grimms' and Disney's portrayal of Snow White evoke an idealized patriarchal past, a Victorian silence about sexuality and a female passivity, in Fables she is active, contemporary and very sexually present (43). Snow White, in Fables, have a twin sister Rose Red, but she is also supposedly the one who was forced to live with seven dwarves after the murder attempt from the evil queen, her stepmother. Hence, she is the daughter of a good mother as well as the evil queen. Life in exile is not an enigma to her. Therefore she easily adjusts to the "prim and proper" role of a deputy major in Fable town. "Always correct and proper", Dun, one of the 'not-so-little pigs' in the Fable farm calls her; "Snow White won't make a move based only on suspicion."(Issue 6:19)

The forking continuity of Snow White's past is restructured by Willingham in Volume 18, Rose Red, named after Snow's prodigal sister. Their twisted past is prophesized by an eagle from whom they rescue the cantankerous dwarf, "Snow White and Rose Red, you'll regret what

you have done. The dwarf is made of malice and dread, as are his seven sons. For one of you seven evils await. For the other, the loss of one dear. Such are the whims of all weaving fate towards those who interfere.”(Issue 95: 16). Snow White and Rose Red lead an uneventful life with their mother in the midst of the forest until they became acquainted with a bear who is later found to be Prince Brandish, Heir Apparent of the kingdom of West, who requests Snow White’s hand in marriage. His father disapproves of the idea of marrying a forest damsel, since it is, as he proclaims, against the intricacies of modern statecraft. To save Prince Brandish from the dire consequences of breaking his vow, the girls’ mother, who is a witch under the King’s service, gives her daughter “forever and ever” away to her sister, the queen of East. The rest of the story is as Grimms’ “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves”.

Rose Red, who is not conscious of the real reason for her sister’s disappearance mistakes it as a betrayal towards her. After Snow White is married to Prince Charming, she goes to live with them, creates havoc and succeeds in seducing the Prince. This estrangement between sisters lasts for centuries until the truth is revealed to Rose Red by their mother, centuries after, in the Fable farm. There is a symbiotic relationship between the mother and her daughters. They are imprisoned by their mother’s desire for reflection, doing as their mother demanded over the years. Winter is the time for Snow White to perform the duties of the house, whereas Rose Red takes charge in summer. The symbolic connotation between the girls and the seasons are unavoidable. Since childhood the mother seems to have always created a division between red and white, summer and winter, passion and purity. However, postmodern feminists like Luce Irigaray do not explicitly refer this kind of distinction between passion and purity and asserts “You are quite red, and still so white.”(1980:70).

The dependency for motherly reflections continues with the mature Snow White and Rose Red. When the series begin, Snow White is the one who is adamant about perfection and

Rose Red is termed the “wild child”. As a deputy mayor, Snow White is illustrated as a sophisticated woman. Rose Red meanwhile is illustrated as a woman in jeans, cropped hair and with a punk countenance. She is also recognizable with her fiery hair and preference for crimson clothing. The girl of summer, she later evolves into the leader of the fable farm and the savior of the downtrodden.

During summertime the mother advices the girls, “Now that snow is gone and the dark things will be returning to the upper world.” (37:3). There is a kind of security associated with winter when all things remain grounded and safe. However, summer produces a contrary effect. Rose Red’s association with summer implies allegiance to vibrancy and passion, which their mother considers as “dark things” which return to the “upper land” in summer. And visitors like big bears should be left alone to tend to their businesses. The bear, to whom they had given shelter in winter, gives further justification about the security of winter to Snow White in her dream: “In winter time, when the earth is frozen hard, they’re obliged to remain in the depths, for they can’t work their way through. But now, in the thawing, they emerge to spy out the upper world and steal what they can.”(38:1).

The Color symbolism that pervades the name of Snow White and Rose Red is not particularly important to the concerned topic but Willingham’s graphics makes it difficult to neglect it. In the ancient principles of alchemy, the red-white association is unavoidable and is the conjunction of opposites, or the coniunctio solis et lunae. Two-headed eagles and representations of the Rebis (a human-being with two heads) are usually colored white and red, signifying the sublimation of the black/white antithesis. Also characteristic of alchemy is the curious white and red rose, symbolizing the union of water with fire. “The thorn on the rose-bush helps to emphasize the counterpoise or ‘conjunction’ between thesis and antithesis, that is, between the ideas of existence and non-existence, ecstasy and anguish, pleasure and pain;

this again is related to the symbolism of the cross” (Cirlot, 341). Analepsis to Snow White and Rose Red’s childhood is literally bordered with thorny roses along the gutters. When they are together, the borders along the panels are decorated with either flower. After their separation, the red and white combo of roses also disappears. The red rose most often stands for charity, love and martyrdom and the white for virginity. These characteristics are implicit in Snow White and Rose Red. Rose Red’s sexuality is challenged when Boy Blue rejects her love in his death bed, which drives her into depression. In Snow White’s case, it is not virginity but motherhood and sense of perfection that defines her.

Jan Assmann observes that cultural memory is continually reconstructed in texts in a hierarchy of relevance, so that certain parts of the cultural memory are projected. Snow White is usually recognized as the girl who was banished by her evil stepmother, was forced to live with seven dwarves and finally saved by a Prince Charming. Fables reconstruct the text by merging it with another tale “Snow White and Rose Red.” The dwarves in Fables are not hospitable as in Grimm’s’ tale and there are implicit sexual connotations in the reconstructed version.

Compared to the kind of remakes and studies on Snow White, there has been only few texts on Rose Red. In Animal Farm, Rose Red expresses her discontent with Snow White’s popularity among humans: “The mundys adore you by millions. By the hundreds of millions. They keep making animated movies and writing their endless children’s stories about you. So you can’t die.”(152: 5). Death happens for fables when mundies (human beings) forget about them. Rose Red’s grudge against her sister arises out of this reason. Her rebellious nature can therefore be identified with her struggles for survival through her existence in cultural memory.

4. “Before she bit the apple, after she bit the apple”- The ancestry of Snow White and Rose Red.

Though Fables begin with the adventures of fairy tale characters and their fight to regain their lost homelands, the later part of the series deals more profoundly with the relationship between Snow White and Rose Red. The appropriation of the original tale on Snow White and Rose Red grant a new identity to the characters. The ancestry of the Snow White and Rose Red, and the fated and inevitable “winnowing of sisterhood” are revealed to the latter by her netherworld guide, Mr. Cricket in Volume 21: The Camelot. Mr. Cricket is seen telling Rose Red, “To know your own story, Rose Red, you have to know the story of your mother Lauda and her older twelve sisters” (Issue 148:4). It further accentuates the influence of their mother on the formulation of their identity and their future.

Lauda belonged to a family of witchery and the “winnowing” of daughters or sisters involved banishing all opposing or competing forces to become inheritor of the family magic. In the case of Lauda and her twelve sisters, it could be only through the murder of the “others”. Her sisters Valka, Lif and Kata succumbed to intentional poisoning. Two years later, Hallerna burst into flames and Tabba was cursed into a thorny bush. Lauda captured the powers of her dead sisters from being redistributed among the rest of them or exclusively to the killer. She instead offered to surrender the powers of the late sisters as well as her own power, in return for sparing her life from future murders. Disowning her kinship rights, she begins her secluded life in the forest until interrupted by her sister Gierge decades after. By infecting her sister “accidently” through a prick from a rose thorn, Lauda makes her vulnerable to excise her hidden magical power, and turn Gierge into a bush, bearing red roses. In marrying a handsome gentleman, Lauda hoped she would have only one child, a sole inheritor of all her magic. But as an intransigence of aforementioned fates, she gave birth to twins, whom she knew that “one will surely die and one will bear the sin of fraticide.” (149: 10).

Generations of women of magic, from the primordial goddesses to their immediate predecessors have tried in vain to stop the deadly competitions and share their powers. As daughters of Lauda, they were also fated to fight each other, until one of them ceased to exist. By proving allegiance to the fable community, a vast majority join Snow White's side, while the delinquents and sorcerers join for Rose Red's support. Here itself, a partiality to the dominant cultural order is evident and Snow White is opted by the majority. In the final installment, Rose Red reevaluates her recent insights into the nature of power and overcomes her foe, her own conscience and pride that led to her former misfortunes. Hope, according to her, is a monster, made worse by inflated self opinion and therefore she rejects hope. Apperception between Snow White and Rose Red ends the final battle without spilling blood or taking arms. The war was fought at the hearts of two women; the surrender of one led to the end of the cold war and concluded the history of Fables in the Mundy world. Rose Red's voluntary surrender is not an act of defeat or an apprehensive retrieval but a submission to the laws of nature which denigrates spilling the blood of the kin.

Rose Red comments, "It's Snow who doesn't like apples. I like them just fine" (149: 12). There is an Eve-like quality in Rose Red that prompts her, from the beginning, to lead a rebellious life, one that breaks all conventions and traditions. In the end, she succeeds in breaking the Winnowing curse and frees her sister and herself from self destruction as well as harm to fable community. Frau Totenkinder further addresses Rose Red as, "the only official leader of any part of our fractured community". An advocate of the downtrodden, she commits to spend the rest of her unknown years away from her sister and with her anthropomorphic companions.

The Fire and ice relationship of Snow White and Rose Red indicates the two aspects of the feminine, the sensible and the passionate. There is an undeniable power in the co-existence

of the two, which grants agency to the repressed. Snow White is seen as a capable Deputy Manager, and Rose Red is a favorite in the Farm. Though they are subverted from their original Grimms creation, Willingham limits their freedom. Fables thus ends with the separation of two sisters, the two symbols of feminine power.

5. Conclusion

Though Fables subverts the gender stereotypes Cinderella, Briar Rose, Red Riding Hood, Snow White and Rose Red among the many have eschewed from their traditional roles to suit the *au courant* contingency. Despite the extrusive presence of females as well as their profound relationships and rivalry, Fable cannot be considered a feminist storytelling, like the postmodern works of Angela Carter, Jeannette Winterson, A. S. Byatt or Margaret Atwood. Kukkonen construes that even though Fables borrows subversive strategies from the postmodern fairy tale, such as positing the characters as good and evil, and placing them in different genre contexts, the series does not subscribe to the emancipatory agenda of postmodern fairy tales as voiced in the tales of Carter and Winterson.

Fable circumstantiate a fairy tale world with the verisimilitude and narrative probabilities of an urban fantasy, espionage thriller, caper comic, political drama, heroic fantasy, quest fantasy and so on, thus proselytizing the audience's reception and excoriating on the genre decorum. Fables are thus a transmogrification of the tradition of fairy tales, as well as of the genre decorum. The appropriation of genre decorum is another narrative strategy adopted by Willingham, which subtly express the use of tradition and subversion in Fables.

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